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DE RUEHSI #1039/01 1241411
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 041411Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6251
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001039

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E.O 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: Georgia Bi-Weekly Update May 4

REF: TBILISI 0926

¶1. This cable contains current items of political, economic, and social interest concerning Georgia during the weeks of April 21-May ¶4.

Opposition Supports South Ossetia Initiative

¶2. Georgian opposition parties have embraced President Saakashvili's proposal to create a temporary administrative unit in South Ossetia (reftel). Representatives of the New Rights Party led by David Gamkrelidze, usually quick to criticize Saakashvili's initiatives, visited the Georgian-controlled part of South Ossetia immediately after Saakashvili's April 23 announcement of his plan. They met with Dmitry Sanakoyev and other members of the "alternative government," as well as with the local population. The de facto government of Eduard Kokoity turned down a New Rights request for a meeting. Shortly afterwards, Industrialist Party leader (and president of the beer producer Kazbegi) Gogi Topadze visited Sanakoyev to discuss joint business projects in agriculture. This year the Kazbegi company plans to invest over USD 300,000 in the conflict zone.

Public Defender vs. the Ministry of Refugees

¶3. On April 30, Public Defender (or Ombudsman) Sozar Subari for the first time used his constitutional right to address the President with a formal letter, requesting him to protect the rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Subari argues that IDPs are being evicted from their temporary shelters without sufficient support from the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation. In many cases, the IDPs have occupied the "temporary" shelters for more than ten years. The Ministry, in turn, has disputed the charges, and Minister Kheviashvili has called for Subari to resign.

Opposition's Controversial Comments on Abkhazia

¶4. On April 23, prominent Republican Party member Paata Zakareishvili made televised comments alleging that a Zugdidi unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was behind a group of Georgian students who became active in Abkhazia during the elections of the de facto parliament in early March, "terrorizing the local population" as Zakareishvili described it. Following the interview, a group of students burst into Republican Party offices to express their indignation. Although Speaker Burjanadze later reprimanded the students for their aggressive action against the Republican Party, prominent National Movement leader Giga Bokeria publicly slammed the Republicans and Zakareishvili for adopting an "anti-state approach." Bokeria said that the party will have to pay a high political cost for such irresponsible statements.

Political Parties Compete for Left-wing Niche

¶5. Opposition parties appear to be competing with each other to organize demonstrations presenting themselves as the champions of rising social issues. Most vocal is Shalva Natelashvili's Labor Party, which called for a nationwide strike April 17 to protest the government's tax and labor policies. Now Natelashvili is calling

for a large protest in front of Parliament on May 10. Other leftist parties seem reluctant to accept Natelashvili's invitation to join this demonstration, and four of them have instead invited him to join an alternative event on May 8, the day Parliament is scheduled to consider bills on rehabilitation fees and an increase of transportation fares. Adding to the mix, Zviad Dzidziguri's Conservative Party is planning a May 10 event to demand increased pensions for retirees.

"Lettergate" Engulfs Natelashvili

¶6. The often cantankerous Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili claimed in April that he had been in consultations with the Iranian Ambassador to Georgia to secure the release of the British Royal Marines then held captive in Iran. Following the Marines' release, Natelashvili took credit publicly. Soon thereafter, he trumpeted his receipt of a glowing letter of appreciation from British Ambassador to Georgia for its role in the resolution of UK's international crisis. As media sources who obtained the letter soon noted, it contained some curious mistakes in its letterhead, referring to "Grat Britain" and "Northen Irland," and was signed by "Her Majesty Ambassador Donald MacLaren," rather than the usual "Her Majesty's Ambassador." MacLaren himself denied the authenticity of the letter before banks of TV news cameras. In response, Natelashvili publicly called MacLaren a powerless puppet of the Saakashvili government, and sent a letter to London demanding his recall.

Prime Minister's Surgery Triggers Rumors

¶7. The unexpected news that Prime Minister Noghaidei underwent heart surgery (related to a congenital defect he has had since childhood) while on an April visit to the U.S. triggered rumors that he might resign, although government officials denied them. Following the April 19 surgery, Noghaidei's health was declared

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satisfactory and he was discharged from the hospital after ten days. His assistant assured reporters that he would resume his duties in early May, but a number of observers noted that the doctors' recommendation that he not overwork seemed hardly compatible with the demands associated with his job.

Will Open Skies Close Skies for Georgian Companies?

¶8. An analytical program on Imedi TV reported that the Georgian government intends to negotiate an Open Skies Agreement with the United States. The report focused in particular on the risks of liberalizing the Georgian air market, which the GOG has been doing on a unilateral basis apart from discussions with the USG on an Open Skies treaty. Representatives of Georgian air companies and the Aviation School asserted that the U.S. agreement would spell the doom of local aviation. French and German experts interviewed on the program recommended that Georgia adopt a protectionist policy favoring national air carriers. European airlines dominate the market for travel from Georgia and would not welcome new competition any more than the Georgian national carriers.

Georgian Trade Union Confederation Celebrates May 1

¶9. About a thousand members of the Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC) held a march in Tbilisi on May 1, which is not a national holiday in Georgia as it is in most of Europe. The marchers were of varied ages, and carried signs promoting adoption of European labor standards. The GTUC issued a "May Day Manifesto" that protests against Georgia's new labor legislation and "all forms of oppression and discrimination in workplaces, attempts to establish unlimited working time and unpaid overtime work, and limiting women's rights to maternity leave." The GTUC urgently seeks a "social dialogue" with the government, aimed at securing effective rights to strike and clear procedures for collective bargaining.

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